

Editorial: Michigan's economy is linked to education

by The Grand Rapids Press Editorial Board

Thursday September 11, 2008, 9:00 AM

WHY IT MATTERS?

More education will help Michigan high schoolers achieve job success and give low-skill workers a leg up in a tough economy.

The unemployment rate for Michigan workers without high school diplomas is *four times* greater than those with a college degree, according to a new report. The Labor Day study revealing the economic challenges faced by the less educated only underscores the need for Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers to work collaboratively with educators to help teens and struggling adults to gain college degrees or technical training.

The Michigan League for Human Services, a non-profit education, research and advocacy group for low-income citizens, produced its report with the support of the Economic Policy Institute. League officials want to see the state expand education and training opportunities for low-skill workers, many of whom have lost jobs due to plant closings and downsizing.

Enhanced skills helps working families get better jobs. And we all benefit. Drawing a paycheck means not draining away state services and cash assistance. State resources are tight. But this type of pro-active investment in traditional and nontraditional students is a priority that will benefit the economy.

The state's No Worker Left Behind (NWLB) program, which retrains laid-off workers for new jobs, is in high demand. The program, funded primarily by federal dollars, will receive \$15 million next fiscal year from the state, \$25 million less than the Department of Labor and Growth Management (DLEG) sought to help meet demand. As of July, more than 31,000 were enrolled with 9,100 waiting. New figures come out this month.

The ability of community colleges to accommodate workers enrolled in the program remains an issue. The state should be providing adequate resources to these institutions, which are crucial to maintaining a skilled workforce.

The League also wants more adult education funding. These programs are an opportunity for dropouts to finish their high school diploma, get a GED or help with English. Adult education funding has dropped from \$80 million in 2000 down to \$24 million this year, which was an increase from recent years.

The report highlights the importance of keeping students on track to graduate and pursue a college degree or certification. The state's more rigorous graduation requirements begin with the graduating class of 2011. Superintendents continue to lobby legislators for flexibility that takes into account individual student aptitude. That flexibility could mean a teen taking business math/personal finance instead of Algebra. Educators are concerned about an increase in dropouts. A year after implementing the tougher standards, a review seems in order about achieving the ultimate goal of more college graduates and technically trained workers to strengthen the state economy.

An estimated 25 percent of the population age 25 and older has at least a bachelor's degree. The unemployment rate for residents with high school diplomas was 20 percent in 2007, compared to less than 5 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. The report comes as the state continues to grapple with the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 8.5 percent. Michigan's median family income has gone backwards since 2001. The report points out that many jobs in the state pay below the poverty wage.

Good factory jobs with benefits stopped being a common avenue toward the good life for high schoolers -- dropouts and graduates -- a long time ago. The focus for Gov. Granholm, lawmakers and educators has to be on preparing students for the new economy and building up the skills of those who are unprepared for it. There is no denying the link between a good education and a good job.
